

May 6, 2009

Tammy Hall: Lake O water releases should continue during drought

*Tammy Hall
Guest Opinion*

This year dry conditions have led to low ground water levels and an overly saline Caloosahatchee River.

Water restrictions are the norm for residents throughout Florida. Agricultural users, while their water use is currently unrestricted, are concerned that future supplies will not be sufficient to meet their demands.

With all demands running high and supplies declining, competition to meet demands has been fierce.

Just like Goldilocks from the children's story, "The Three Bears", when it comes to ecosystems and water user groups, we all have something in common.

We all want our water "just right." Not too much or too little.

The Caloosahatchee River and estuary is no different in its need for the right mix of fresh and salt water.

The Caloosahatchee is a very resilient system and has adapted to our weather extremes.

And while the Caloosahatchee is very flexible, prolonged periods of excess fresh water that comes from storm events or high levels of salt water encroaching up the river due to droughts can lead to adverse impacts to plants and animals to one of Florida's most productive estuaries.

Historically, the Caloosahatchee was not connected to Lake Okeechobee. Fresh water flowed to the river as runoff in the basin, through underground migration, and from natural springs.

The draining of the lands, dredging of the river, and creation of a connection to Lake Okeechobee irretrievably changed the natural system.

Our system is now subject to water management decisions that can, and have, starved the Caloosahatchee of fresh water when it needs it, and inundates it when we are already drowning.

The same Lake Okeechobee source is used to provide water to sugar and citrus farmers and as a back-up supply for utilities along the southeast coast.

In times like these when little rain is falling and Lake Okeechobee declines, all users want what is perceived as their fair share.

Your county commission and Lee County staff members are strongly advocating for what is best for the Caloosahatchee while remaining mindful of the needs of urban and agricultural users, as well as the environmental water needs of the entire greater Everglades system.

Our message has been very simple; the amount of water needed to help sustain our incredibly

productive estuary is only a tiny fraction of the water that is provided to other water users.

While the small amount may be a relatively insignificant amount from the total water allocation, the benefit to the estuary and the \$4 billion industry it supports is tremendous.

We believe that if any cutbacks to the Caloosahatchee are considered, a thorough analysis be completed to determine if these cuts would have any measurable and significant benefit to other users. Additionally, an analysis of how other users could cut back to maintain "Shared Adversity" is also required.

Successfully, Lee County has made the case to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that environmental releases should be made.

We will continue to make clear, both to the South Florida Water Management District and the Corps, that environmental releases should continue until the wet season begins. Anything less, without concurrent reductions by other users, would be grossly inequitable.

We will continue to battle to ensure that the Caloosahatchee is not constantly used as a dumping ground when water is too plentiful.

That goal does not change the fact that we also need some water flows during the dry season.

We remain committed to working with the necessary agencies to ensure that the Caloosahatchee is provided the fresh water it requires during the dry season and to not be considered the path of least resistance to dump on when water is in excess.

Not too much, not too little, just right.